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* How I write Jeet Thayil



Drawing on his own experience as a drug addict, Jeet Thayil's debut novel, *Narcopolis*, dove into the world of opium in 1970s Bombay. The book won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2013 and was shortlisted for the Man Booker and the Man Asian Literary Prize. Born in Kerala, India, Thayil was educated in Hong Kong, New York and Mumbai. He is a performance poet, songwriter and guitarist as well as a writer. He now lives in Shanghai as M on the Bund's writer in residence. Here, he talks to **Charlotte Middlehurst** about his craft.

Books

Hitting the small time

Lao Ma is blazing literary trails in China. He tells **Charlotte Middlehurst** why super-short stories aren't just a flash in the pan

No one can say exactly why 'flash fiction' is becoming so popular in this country. It's certainly a break from the Chinese norm, which is a slavish, establishmentarian commitment to the belief that 'more is more', and that a novel must be long to qualify as an example of the art. 'Many professional Chinese writers are remunerated in part according to their literary output, as measured by the number of words, which creates an institutional bias,' says Harvey Thomlinson, founder of publishing house Make-Do Studios.

Mo Yan, Nobel literature laureate and author of 1986's *Red Sorghum Clan*, sums it up so: 'Any novel less than 200,000 words lacks dignity. A leopard might be fierce and brave but he is too short in stature to be the king of the jungle.' But now the leopard's time has arrived, with flash fiction soaring in popularity. And now Make-Do has published *Individuals*, a collection of stories from China's leader of flash fiction, Lao Ma.

In some ways, Lao Ma (the pen name of Prof Ma Junjie) is the unlikely face of a rather progressive genre. He is professor of literature at Renmin University in Beijing, recently ranked the third best in the country. Clad in beige chinos and a waspish 'Regatta'-emblazoned polo shirt, he is no maverick – at least not on the surface. But his stories are as punchy and sardonic as any upstart; full of humour, wisdom and vim. The

178-page *Individuals* contains 55 stories, some only a page long, which parody the small-minded everymen, frustrated professors and pompous officials. It's one big comic send-up.

The tales, which cover themes such as corruption, a skewed hierarchical system and immoral behaviour, range from the fantastical to realistic. For example, in 'Silver Tongue', an esteemed public speaker is afflicted with a rare condition that renders him mute, only cured by a healthy cash payment. In 'Interesting!', professor Young Hou rages about the pestilence of corrupt officials, only to apply for the job of deputy county chief – and not so he can fix the system from the inside.

So how fictitious is Ma's fiction, really? 'The themes of my stories mostly reflect current affairs, or are spotlights or flash points on the current state of China,' he says. 'I'm not just an observer but a participant in my stories; I'm telling stories of the life I'm living and of those I've witnessed. The human failings I satirise are not just found in others, but also myself.'

'It might be a way to vent frustration... but I'd rather share my understandings through humour. I think humour is more powerful than solemnity. A nation that can't mock itself will always have a swaggering ego. In contemporary China this is evident in our political system and economy, and even our daily lives.'

Lao Ma was born in Dongjiagou, a village just outside of Dalian. As a six-year-old he taught himself to read from newspapers, and in school he shone, achieving the highest marks in the county for his *gaokao* college entrance examination. But he wasn't allowed to study literature, as he wanted; his headmaster forced him to take philosophy, which could lead to a job as a county magistrate.

Ma began to write novels in the 1990s, but only turned his hand to short stories in 2008, taking inspiration from the titans of genre: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Jorge Luis Borges and Japan's Shinichi Hoshi. His own works, such as *Ai Hai Yo (Hey)*, *Sha Xiao (Giggle)* and *Ge Bie Ren (Individuals)* have gained him numerous awards.

While the establishment might not be ready for flash fiction, that doesn't stop Ma making his point the best way he knows how, with wit: 'Chinese people have a cultural gene that favours big things. But we also have an idiom that "small is good", or *xiaoshuo* which literally means "small tells". So small things aren't that unfamiliar to literary circles.'

For now, the lions still hold court, but the leopards are on the march. Flash-fiction may not be as short-lived as its name would suggest. *Additional reporting by Xia Keyu.*

Individuals is available from The Bookworm, priced 80RMB.

Do you start work early in the morning or late at night?

First thing in the morning, when it's still quiet and the dream state is fresh.

Do you have a ritual?

You need rituals when it's not going well. At the moment, my only ritual is shutting down the Internet.

Where do you write?

At home, in a hotel room, in trains, though not in planes.

Do you jot ideas in a notebook or sit methodically at the computer?

Both.

How do you start – do chapters come easily or are they always a struggle?

I prefer not to start. I like to be in the middle of something that I can expand or improve. The idea of starting can be daunting.

What inspires you?

Inspiration is overrated. It's better just to get to work.

How long does it take to finish a chapter/story/book?

Much too long; there's nothing pleasurable about sitting alone in a room and staring at a screen.

Is there a process?

Yes, as somebody said, you sit in front of the machine until drops of blood appear on the forehead.

When did you start writing?

In my teens.

How do you know when you're done with a story?

When you spend all morning putting in a comma and all afternoon taking it out.

What's your biggest challenge as an author?

Writing.

Narcopolis is available to buy from www.amazon.cn for 76.40RMB.

Recommended reads

The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China Hannah Pakula



Dragon lady? Madame Chiang, with Chiang Kai-shek and US Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, in 1942

Simon & Schuster

Madame Chiang, wife of Chiang Kai-shek, leader of China's Nationalist Party, was the 'Dragon Lady'; imperious (though never imperial), hard-boiled and cunning. In her 763-page biography, American author Hannah Pakula gives a rich, if not weighty, account of how the daughter of a runaway peasant became mother to the Republic of China. Though she never had children herself, Chiang, born Soong May-ling, suckled her political career with devotion and patience until it bore fruit, securing her a place alongside Teddy Roosevelt and Winston Churchill at the bargaining table of China's future.

The story begins with Soong May-ling's father, Hainan-born Charlie Soong, a self-made Methodist millionaire who found fortune, and religion, after escaping his uncle's teashop in Boston. Eager to cement his social standing, all three of his daughters – May-ling being the youngest – were sent to America to be educated, returning as minions of Soong-family dynastic expansion. As with the Mitford sisters in Britain a decade or two later, the Soong girls became society gossip-fodder, destined to marry into power and politics, which they dutifully did, though not as their parents intended.

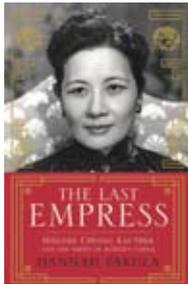
The eldest, Ai-ling, married HH Kung, a descendant of Confucius and one of the richest men in China. The second, Ching-ling, married Sun Yat-sun, founding father of the Republic of China. In marrying Sun's protégé, Chiang Kai-shek, May-ling's choice – and unusually at that time, it was a choice – gave her a seat at the table where she used her 'pure sex

appeal', as journalist Edward Murrow put it, and an understanding of American culture, to influence East-West relations. At under five feet tall, the diminutive Madame is said to have bewitched the US government out of billions, funding the Nationalist cause and her own purse. Eleanor Roosevelt concluded: 'She can talk beautifully about democracy, but she doesn't know how to live democracy.'

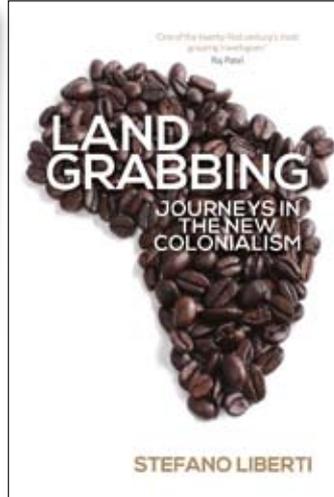
Pakula's previous biographies are *An Uncommon Woman: The Empress Frederick* and *The Last Romantic: A Biography of Queen Marie of Roumania*, so she is well equipped to handle a grandiose woman who certainly thought of herself as being of similar standing to such figures. While the book is long, the content feels relevant throughout, though not always to the personal story of the May-ling, who is lost for entire chapters that depict the events around her.

Towards the end of her life, a sponsor for the Taipei city government commented: 'She is considered a historic figure but no longer a saint.' Pakula, rightly, treats her as such. There is no unnecessary flattery but the Madame's brilliance still shines through. The book also corrects the popular narrative that's emerged in recent times that paints Chiang Kai-shek and his wife as bogeymen who mismanaged Taiwan to the point of breaking. The reality, like the woman herself, was far more complicated, a point that Pakula conveys. This book captures the spirit of the age while restoring to life a dazzling-yet-flawed woman who lived at the centre of it all. **CM**

The Last Empress is available from www.amazon.cn for 194.70RMB.



Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism Stefano Liberti



BOOK OF THE MONTH

Verso

Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism, the new book from Italian journalist Stefano Liberti, is an alarming expose of how one half of the world is being starved in order to feed the other. Originally published in Italian in 2011, this newly translated version takes the reader to the agrarian farmlands of the planet's developing nations. We journey to Ethiopia, where the Dutch are pioneering an avant-garde

industrial farming method, and to Brazil's 'united states of soya' in Matto Grosso, where five global commodities trading houses have managed to monopolise the wealth of the entire region.

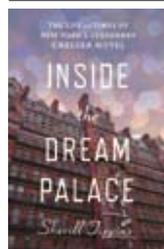
Liberti, a writer for left-wing Italian daily newspaper *il manifesto*, first became interested in the topic following the 2007-2008 global food crisis, when commodity prices skyrocketed, triggering riots from Haiti to Bangladesh to Egypt. Liberti followed the money to the Chicago Stock Exchange, where he discovered millions of dollars of speculative capital were moving to food products in non-developed countries. This launched a three-year study, which later became this book.

Land Grabbing is not about doom forecasting. However it does set out troubling discoveries about the global food chain. The result is a thought provoking examination of a subject not talked about enough: namely, what will happen if developing countries continue to sell off agriculture to richer countries in the wake of global warming. While society may have learned to grow hamburgers in test tubes, the hunger for land, it seems, is as ravenous as ever. **CM**

Land Grabbing is available from www.amazon.cn for 194.70RMB.

Inside the Dream Palace: The Life and Times of New York's Legendary Chelsea Hotel Sherill Tippins

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt



Stand long enough in Times Square, promises one variant of an old New York saying, and you'll see the whole world pass by. The same might be said about lingering

in the lobby of the Chelsea Hotel – fabled home of artists, musicians, writers and bohemians of all kinds – through much of the 20th century. With her lively *Inside the Dream Palace*, literary biographer Sherill Tippins succeeds where other historians studying New York landmarks have failed: she understands that even the most splendid buildings are mere settings for the personalities that inhabit

them, and wisely bypasses rote chronology for the vigour of cultural excavation. Taken in small doses, Tippins's prose rarely transcends the serviceable, but in treating the Chelsea as a 12-floor palimpsest, the author achieves a masterful totality. Driven by clear storytelling, the narrative spins like a revolving door on hyper speed. The days of Arthur Miller, Patti Smith, Thomas Wolfe and other residents fly by in a dizzying approximation of the transience of NYC life, suggesting a fragility behind the nation's strongest artistic creations. The Chelsea Hotel may face an uncertain future, but Tippins's enchanting book guarantees its renown for generations to come.

David Freeland

Inside the Dream Palace is available to buy from www.amazon.cn for 207.90RMB.